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ABSTRACT

During the years 1986-1988, a Swedish research project called "Sons" tried to provide some tentative answers to questions raised by the recent focus on gender issues in peace education. A total of 20 feminist and 20 traditional mothers of sons were interviewed concerning their ideas about the development of their sons and about the difficulties they had encountered in providing their sons with peace education. The interviews revealed that almost all the mothers wanted to raise a nonsexist son and gentle boy, and thus wanted to provide them with an alternative education. Nevertheless, most of the mothers felt that they did not succeed in educating their sons the way they had originally wanted to. Feminist mothers never used a biological argument when their sons developed into more typical males than the mothers had wanted them to. Feminist mothers deplored the influence of sports clubs to which their sons belonged, noting that they fostered a competitive and rough spirit. More than half the feminist mothers, as opposed to a quarter of the traditional mothers, had given their sons dolls. In many cases, the mothers in general saw the children's father as the main obstacle to the boy's peace education, insofar as the father wanted his sons to be treated tougher and rougher than the mothers wanted them to be treated. Other adverse social influences, such as those of other parents or the father's friends, were noted. Brief concluding remarks address the strength of environmental pressures on boys to conform to the traditional male model. (HOD)

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THE RAISING OF A PEACEFUL BOY

Birgit Brock-Utne

The recent focus on gender issues within peace education has brought to the forefront new questions for study, such as: Do we educate girls for peace and boys for war? Are there elements in the education given to girls which ought to be given to boys and vice versa?

In the project "Sons", twenty feminist mothers of sons and twenty traditional mothers of sons were interviewed about the ideals they had for the development of their sons and about the difficulties they had encountered. Women in the first group had been full-time career-women when their children were small and had felt connected to the women's liberation movement. Women in the second group had seen their role as home-maker and mother as their primary role.

The paper shows that traditional mothers are likely to blame "the genes" when their sons turn out a more traditional male than the mother had wanted him to. Feminist mothers are more likely to blame themselves. The paper further shows, through examples, how environmental pressures work on the little boy to make him masculine and tough. The examples are taken from many environments like the pre-school, the home, video-viewing, the influence of fathers of the other boys and of sports clubs.

THE RAISING OF A PEACEFUL BOY

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The recent focus on gender issues within peace education has brought to the forefront a whole set of novel questions for examination and research. Questions like: Do we educate girls for peace and boys for war? Are there elements in the education given to girls which ought to be given to boys and vice versa? Are boys raised to become tough and insensitive to other human beings? How is this done and what roles do mothers play in this training? Do feminist mothers have other ideals for their sons than more traditional mothers? Do feminist mothers buy fewer wartoys for their sons than more traditional mothers do? Do their sons participate more in housework and in the sharing of domestic chores than sons of more traditional mothers?

The research project "Sons", which I led in the years 1986-1988, has tried to provide some tentative answers to some of these questions (Brock-Utne, 1989b). We interviewed twenty feminist mothers of sons and twenty traditional mothers of sons about the ideals they had for the development of their sons and about the difficulties they had encountered. The women we called feminist mothers had all been full-time career-women even when their children were small and had participated in and felt connected to the women's liberation movement. The more traditional mothers had seen their role as home-maker and mother as their primary role. Many of them were working part-time now but had not had employed work at all when their children were small. They had not participated in and felt partly reluctant to the women's liberation movement.

The ideal son

Almost all of the twenty feminist mothers interviewed want to give their sons an alternative education. They want to raise a non-sexist and gentle boy. A boy who cares about others, has empathy with humankind. A boy who shows and talks about emotions. The mothers do not want a tough and domineering son. They do not want their son to be a typical boy of the kind who gets into fights, swears and talks loudly and tries to dominate his surroundings. They want their sons to share domestic chores equally with their prospective wives and want their sons to live with strong and independent women, women who stand for something in their own right. When the sons are small, the feminist mothers often give them dolls to play with. They try to counteract a cult of toughness surrounding their boys. They try to have their sons participate in housework, have duties around the house. They give them physical warmth and tenderness.

Blaming the victim

But most of them feel that they do not succeed in educating their son the way they want. Many of them have a guilty conscience in this connection. They feel that they have not spent enough time with and energy on their son. They are quick to blame themselves and their careers when the son has not developed like the mother wanted him to. The feminist mothers seek explanations for their lack of success in raising their son according to their ideals in environmental factors. They blame themselves for not having had enough time and energy to counteract the environmental influences which have worked on their son to make him into a more traditional boy than the mother wanted him to be. They have not lived up to the myth of the good mother, the mother who is always there, who sacrifices her life for her children. This myth, even if the feminist mothers verbally oppose it, still haunts them, gives them a bad conscience and guides their thinking.

Blaming the genes

The feminist mothers never use a biological argument like the more

traditional mothers do when their sons develop into more typical males than the mothers had wanted them to. The traditional mothers use expressions like "boys will be boys" and claim that there are innate personality differences between the sexes. Boys are "by nature" more aggressive, do not see dust or when a room needs cleaning. One of the traditional mothers claimed that "boys can easily manage a vacuum-cleaner and a washing machine. Technical gadgets belong to the realm of boys, but they do not see where the dust is and are helpless when it comes to the sorting of clothes to wash at what degrees and then when it comes to ironing." Elsewhere I have used some space to refute the biological arguments (see Brock-Utne, 1985; Brock-Utne, 1989a) and will here devote the space to a scrutiny of some of the environmental influences working on the young boys and their mothers.

Environmental pressures on a boy to conform

The environmental pressures working on a boy to make him conform to the stereotype of a traditional boy are gigantic. They meet him in all situations and from his most tender age. He meets the pressure from his playmates, the teachers in Kindergarten and grade-school, his class-mates and friends, the sports coaches, his father and the fathers of his friends, his grandparents on both sides, from cartoons, television, play material and books. Below, I shall illustrate some of these pressures by letting the mothers speak. By lending our ear to them we may understand masculine socialization somewhat better.

"Are you raising him to become a homosexual?"

More than half of the feminist mothers, against only a fourth of the more traditional mothers, had given their sons dolls. Here one of the feminist mothers tells about her son, Dag Olav, who very much wanted a doll for his birthday:

> "Dag Olav, as my first child, got a doll for his birthday because that was what he wanted for a gift. My mother-in-law was present at that birthday and she said to me: 'Are you trying to raise that boy to become a homosexual?' I told her I did not care. I felt that boys should also have the opportunity to play with the toys they wanted to play with. And I felt

that doll-play would be good training for a future role of father and husband, for learning to care and relate."

Accusations like these, which do not have any empirical basis whatsoever, that mothers who give their sons dolls may easily turn their sons into homosexuals, are hard to take in a society still filled with homophobia. Homophobia seems to account for the many assurances we got from the traditional mothers that they would not go so far as to buy a doll for their son - a teddybear, yes, but not a real doll. It did not seem "natural" they argued. A couple of the traditional mothers mentioned that their sons liked to play with their sisters' dolls, but the mothers saw it as their duty to watch that the boys did not play "too much" with the dolls. One of them said: "Of course I do not want a boy who is queer. Not one in that category, you know."

"You may do the shopping"

It is not only the mother who wants to give her son a doll who is met with contempt. Her small son will also feel it. The pressure on him will often come from playmates, both boys and girls. In the following one of the feminist mothers tells about her son, Bjørn, and his experiences in Kindergarten:

"Well, there I was in the new Kindergarten with my little son Bjørn. We had worked so hard to build this Kindergarten, parents and children together. It was real community work and should be such a wonderful place for kids to be. We were the teachers of two nearby schools who had joined forces and built this place for our young children together. Our philosophy was that the children should participate in the building of the pre-school. In that way they would feel more ownership of the place. We built corners and created toys together. We made a doll's corner with a couple of beds for dolls, with dolls, bath-tubs, clothes and a small stove and refrigerator. And every day Bjørn just looked forward to the day the place would be ready for him to play in. There was no doubt in his mind. He wanted to play in the doll's corner. The first day all he could talk about was the doll's corner. But after a couple of days I never saw him there any more. Instead he was outside with the boys digging tunnels and animal graves. I asked him: 'Why are you never in the doll's corner any

more?'. And then he answered: 'Oh, Gee, there is no point in going there. Everytime one of us boys comes to that corner one of the girls gives us a plastic bag and says: 'You can do the shopping.' We are never allowed to do the fun things in the doll's corner, like giving the dolls a bath or feeding them.'

One could detect very well in that Kindergarten how the children themselves put pressure on each other to conform to traditional gender roles. This they did even though they were just four - five years old. I find that the girls should have been digging more and using their muscles and of course the boys should have participated in the real play going on in the doll's corner."

The pressure to get boys away from playing with dolls is strong and is exerted as well when the boy wants to play in the doll's corner in Kindergarten and is sent shopping instead, as when his mother is accused of making her son into a homosexual because she has given him a doll to play with. One mother told us that personnel in the Kindergarten where she had her son had recommended that she buy a gun for her son because he was such a timid and shy boy. Another mother told us that the Kindergarten teacher had said that her son ought to learn how to fight because he was a boy and "it is natural for boys to get into some fistfights."

"The father of my sons wanted them to see the worst videofilms"

In many cases the mothers see the children's father or stepfather as the main obstacle they have to face when they want to raise a son according to their own ideals. In almost all of these cases the fathers/stepfathers want to treat the boys harsher than the mothers want to. The fathers want their sons tougher and rougher than the mothers want them. They do not, according to the mothers, see the gentle and empathetic boy as an ideal. In a couple of instances the mothers mention that they have found it hard to get their sons to participate in housework because the sons have seen how their fathers have sabotaged this type of work. In some other instances the mothers mention that they have felt that they have been more or less alone raising the children because their husbands have given priority to their own careers. But when they mention problems they have had with the fathers/stepfathers in

connection with the raising of their sons, they stress the conflicting values held by themselves and the men. They want their son to become another person than the fathers want them to become. The differences are systematic, always in the same direction with the fathers with higher career ambitions for their sons, with a wish that they excel and that they become tough, more "real men." In some instances these conflicts have led to divorce. And in some instances the mothers feel that their sons would have developed in a better way had the mothers divorced the fathers or divorced them earlier than they did.

One mother tells how the father scolded her because he felt that she gave her sons too much physical affection, hugged them and held them tight. She let the youngest son, who was very frightened at night, sleep with her in her bed for many years to the great annoyance of her husband. Her mother-in-law also scolded her for this and told her over and over again that she was not firm enough with the boys. But the biggest conflict she had with her husband was over the type of cultural influence the sons should be exposed to. She wanted to take the sons to children's plays, to puppet-theatres, creative dancing and concerts. Her husband just made fun of such activities. He loved tv and videos. We quote her here:

> "The father of my boys just loves to watch tv, all channels that exist in the world. From the time he came home from work, nothing else existed than tv and video. He rented the most horrible movies. When I was away sometimes in the evenings I would find my sons sitting up when I came back watching the most horrible videos full of violence and brutality. The youngest was just a scared little boy at that time. He was so scared afterwards and the eldest were tired at school. I was so against all the tv- and videowatching every day and far into the night. I was especially annoyed at the fact that he rented films for adults (18 years age-limit) and placed our poor little son in front of them.
>
> No wonder he got scared and wanted to sleep in my bed at night and have me to comfort him. And I got dead tired and was also scolded by my husband because I let the boy sleep in my bed. What else could I do? He was so scared. I tried to give him a feeling of safety and security, a feeling that his father tore down all the time through these horrible movies. We had many conflicts about this. At the end he found someone else and moved in with a young girl. Now the two of them sit together at night and smoke and watch video. And when the boys have been there to

visit, they are dead tired because they have watched video to one or two at night and the small one is allergic to smoke. But I was the one who was blamed by my mother because my husband left me. 'No wonder he left you,' she says. 'You were too much away from home and you did not prepare good enough food for him, did not look after him the way a proper wife should.' But I think it would have been better for my sons had I divorced their father long ago."

Another feminist mother, who is also divorced from the father of her son, tells about good cooperation between her ex-husband and herself when it comes to the raising of the sons. They share the same educational philosophy and agree very much when it comes to activities their boys ought to participate in and attitudes they would like to foster. But some time after the divorce the mother remarried and her new husband was much stricter with the boy than his father and than the mother thought he ought to be. We lend her our ear:

"Jørn's father and I very much agreed when it came to the raising of Jørn. And if we, on a rare occasion, disagreed, we would never discuss our disagreement while Jørn was there. Had one of us said something, the other one would keep quiet. We would then discuss our disagreement later on when Jørn was not there. But my new husband is much tougher and stricter. He demands much more from Jørn. I feel that Jørn receives too rough treatment from his step-father. The step-father did not have any children of his own so it is maybe easier then to think children should be spoken harshly to. The step-father is very masculine, big and strong. Jørn is not that type at all. They are very different types and there have been many and bitter conflicts. The step-father is so tough and strict. Jørn always gives in, is so kind, so gentle. I have to step in and help him. I feel a responsibility to get him through these conflicts so I go between the two to protect my son. Get him through without suffering too much, without getting destroyed by his step-father. It has often been very strenuous for me to go between the two all the time."

There are also several of the traditional mothers who deplore the fact that their husbands want to make the sons into tougher boys than the mothers would like. One of them tells us:

"I have a special relationship to my eldest son. He is a somewhat cautious

and gentle type of boy. That fact is precisely the reason why his father wants him to become tough. I find that he has frequently treated him too roughly. So therefore I have tried to protect him as best I could. I am also rather upset with my husband's many sexist jokes and his frequent comments about women drivers among other things."

Another mother tells us when we ask her whether there have been any obstacles preventing her from raising her son the way she has wanted to:

"The obstacles have been of an emotional kind. My husband and I have values that clash when it comes to the raising of our sons. My husband has wanted the boys to become much tougher than I have wanted them to become. I wanted them to be able to show emotions and empathy, to have close relationships to other human beings."

"Correct starting position for a 60-meter race"

But even in instances where mother and father agree in the raising of their sons, share the same values and want their sons to develop the warm, tender and creative parts of themselves, they may run up against strong pressures which may counteract the attitudes they try to foster. Sometimes the ones who exert this pressure are other parents, especially the fathers of the friends of their sons. A feminist mother tells:

"The main obstacle I have had to face when it came to raising my son in a certain way was the pressure put on him from the omnipresent fathers of his friends. These fathers attached great importance to the performance of their sons in sports activities. They would always be present at sports events, drive their sons to the arrangements, would show them the correct starting position when running a 60-meter race. And they would scream and yell to them and cheer them on. My son felt on the one hand a little sore that he did not have a father like that. On the other hand I felt that the activities these fathers engaged themselves in really counteracted everything I wanted to build up in my son. The fathers destroyed the school championships by making them so competitive that the poor kids were crying if they let their fathers down. The fathers were there to see their sons win."

One of the other feminist mothers expressed herself this way:

> "The main obstacle I have encountered when I have tried to raise my sons according to my own values is personified in the typical father around the place where we live. The typical father around here is the one who with enthusiasm drives his sons to and from the icehockey field and is great buddies with his sons. And he takes his sons with him to watch football and watches sports with them on television. But he has trouble really relating to his sons, to open up and talk about emotions. It is not easy to attempt to raise boys in an alternative manner in this environment. The friends of my sons come up with negative comments about the fact that my sons do a lot of washing up, have their own housechores to do and always pack their own lunch-boxes."

"In the sports clubs they learn to play it rough"

Several of the feminist mothers deplore the influence of the sports clubs their sons belong to. They feel that they fight a losing battle against these clubs. While the mothers would like their sons to develop into sensitive, empathetic and cooperative human beings, the clubs foster a competitive and rough spirit. We lend our ear to one of the mothers:

> "Here at home we are in charge. We can let our values and our rules be the decisive ones. But outside of our home there are so many traditional roles and norms. The lessons at school are not bad, but there are lessons of a very traditional nature taking place in the playground at recesses. And in the sports clubs there is really a tough environment. There the boys learn to swear and look at girls as sex-objects and things like that. Karsten plays football and I feel that the coach tries to destroy everything in him that I have tried to build up. I sometimes wonder what these coaches think they are doing."

The environmental pressures working on a young boy to have him conform to the traditional male role seem to be so strong that we do not need to look for biological explanations to explain how boys become boys.

There is maybe not so much reason for feminist mothers to put the blame on themselves when their boys develop in a more traditional way than the mothers had wanted them to.

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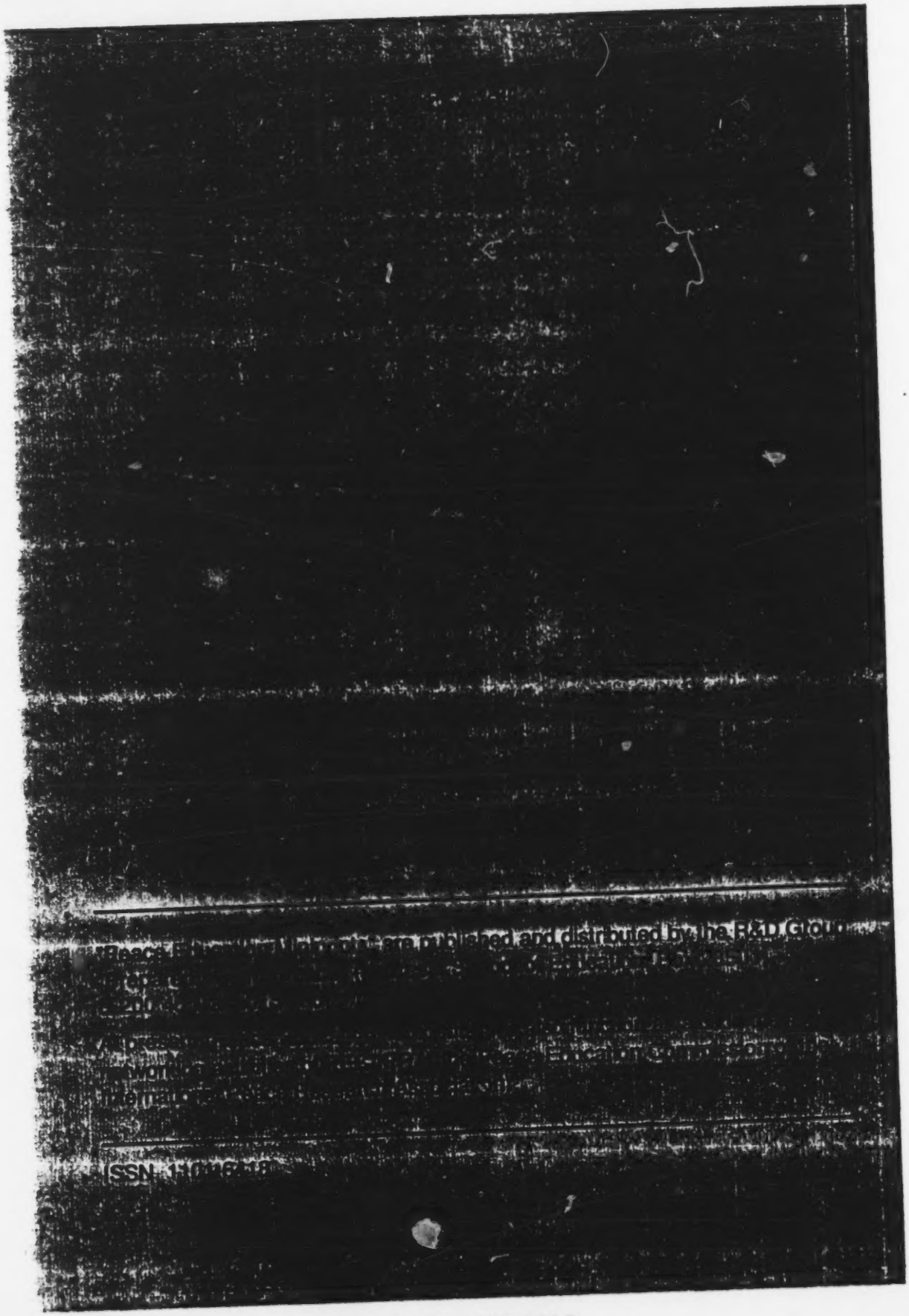

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